

Teotihuacan, Maya and Aztec  
AP World History  
Kienast

### **Teotihuacan**

It was massive, one of the first great cities of the Western Hemisphere. And its origins are a mystery. It was built by hand more than a thousand years before the swooping arrival of the Nahuatl-speaking Aztec in central Mexico. But it was the Aztec, descending on the abandoned site, no doubt falling awestruck by what they saw, who gave it a name: Teotihuacan. A famed archaeological site located fewer than 30 miles (50 kilometers) from Mexico City, Teotihuacan reached its zenith between 100 B.C.E. and CE 650. It covered 8 square miles (21 square kilometers) and supported a population of a hundred thousand, according to George Cowgill, an archaeologist at Arizona State University. "It was the largest city anywhere in the Western Hemisphere before the 1400s," Cowgill says. "It had thousands of residential compounds and scores of pyramid-temples and was comparable to the largest pyramids of Egypt."

Oddly, Teotihuacan, which contains a massive central road (the Street of the Dead) and buildings including the Temple of the Sun and the Temple of the Moon, has no military structures—though experts say the military and cultural wake of Teotihuacan was heavily felt throughout the region.

One enduring question about Teotihuacan is who built the city. Scholars once pointed to the Toltec culture. Others note that the Toltec peaked far later than Teotihuacan's zenith, undermining that theory. Some scholars say the Totonac culture was responsible. No matter its principal builders, evidence shows that Teotihuacan hosted a patchwork of cultures including the Maya, Mixtec, and foundational Olmec. These cultures were spread throughout Mesoamerica due to cultural diffusion caused by interregional trade.

The main excavations, performed by Professors Saburo Sugiyama of Aichi Prefectural University in Japan and Rubén Cabrera, a Mexican archaeologist, have been at the Pyramid of the Moon. It was there, beneath layers of dirt and stone, that researchers realized the awe-inspiring craftsmanship of Teotihuacan's architects was matched by a cultural penchant for brutality and human and animal sacrifice. Inside the temple, researchers found buried animals and bodies, with heads that had been lobbed off, all thought to be offerings to gods or sanctification for successive layers of the pyramid as it was built.

It's unclear why Teotihuacan collapsed; one theory is that poorer classes carried out an internal uprising against the elite. For Cowgill, who says more studies are needed to understand the lives of the poorer classes that inhabited Teotihuacan, the mystery lies not as much in who built the city or in why it fell. "Rather than asking why Teotihuacan collapsed, it is more interesting to ask why it lasted so long," he says. "What were the social, political, and religious practices that provided such stability?"

## **Maya Civilization**

The Maya are probably the best-known of the classical civilizations of Mesoamerica. Mayan history starts in the Yucatan around 2600 BCE, Mayan history rose to prominence around CE. 250 in present-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, western Honduras, El Salvador, and northern Belize.

Building on the inherited inventions and ideas of earlier civilizations such as the Olmec, the Maya developed astronomy, calendar systems and hieroglyphic writing. The Maya were noted as well for elaborate and highly decorated ceremonial architecture, including temple-pyramids, palaces and observatories, all built without metal tools. Mayan history shows that they were also skilled farmers, clearing large sections of tropical rain forest and, where groundwater was scarce, building sizeable underground reservoirs for the storage of rainwater. The Maya were equally skilled as weavers and potters, and cleared routes through jungles and swamps to foster extensive trade networks with distant peoples. It is agreed that the Maya developed a complex calendar and the most elaborate form of hieroglyphics in America, both based on the Olmec's versions.

Most artistic and cultural achievement came about during the Classic period 300 - 900 CE. The Maya developed a complex, hierarchical society divided into classes and professions. Centralized governments, headed by a king, ruled territories with clearly defined boundaries. These borders changed as the various states lost and gained control over territory. Mayan centers flourished in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. The major cities of the Classic period were Tikal (Guatemala), Palenque and Yaxchil n (Chiapas, Mexico), For most of this period, the majority of the Maya population lived in the central lowlands of Mexico and Belize.

Anthropologists used to contrast the "peaceful" Maya with the bloodthirsty Aztecs of central Mexico. Although human sacrifice was not as important to the Maya as to the Aztec, blood sacrifice played a major role in their religion. Individuals offered up their blood, but not necessarily their lives, to the gods through painful methods using sharp instruments such as sting-ray spines or performed ritualistic self mutilation. It is probable that people of all classes shed their blood during religious rites. The king's blood sacrifice was the most valuable and took place more frequently. The Maya were warlike and raided their neighbors for land, citizens, and captives. Some captives were subjected to the double sacrifice where the victims heart was torn out for the sun and head cut off to pour blood out for the earth.

The Mayan civilization was the height of pre-Columbian culture. They made significant discoveries in science, including the use of the zero in mathematics. Their writing was the only in America capable of expressing all types of thought. Glyphs either represent syllables or whole concepts and were written on long strips of paper or carved and painted on stone. They are arranged to be read from left to right and top to bottom in pairs of columns. The Mayan calendar begins around 3114 BCE, before Maya culture existed, and could measure time well into the future. They wrote detailed histories called the Mayan Codex and used their calendar to predict the future and astrological events. Fray Diego de Landa, second bishop of the Yucatan ordered a mass destruction of Mayan books in 1562 and only three survived.

After the Classic period, the Maya migrated to the Yucatan peninsula. There they developed their own character, although their accomplishments and artwork are not considered as impressive as the Classic Maya. Most of the ruins you can see South of Cancun are from this time period and are definitely worth a visit. Chichen Itza (near Valladolid), Uxmal (near Merida) and Mayapan (west of Chichen Itza) were the three most important cities during the Post Classic period. They lived in relative peace from around 1000 - 1100 CE when Mayapan overthrew the confederation and ruled for over 200 years. In 1441 the Maya who had previously ruled Uxmal destroyed the city of Mayapan and founded a new city at Mani. Wars were fought between rival Mayan groups over the territory until the region was conquered by the Spanish.

Chichen Itza was first populated between 500 and 900 CE by Mayans and for some reason abandoned around 900, the city was then resettled 100 years later and subsequently invaded by Toltecs from the North. There are numerous reliefs of both Mayan gods including Chac and the Toltec gods including Quetzacoatl. For some reason the city was abandoned around 1300.

### **The Aztecs**

Unlike the Maya, Mesoamerica's other pre-Columbian powerhouse, the Aztec are exclusively identified with Mexico, and today it spares no opportunity to mythologize them. In the center of the Mexican flag is the Aztec eagle, which is also incorporated into the logos of the nation's two main airlines. There is Banco Azteca and TV Azteca, and the national soccer team wears uniforms featuring the iconic eagle and plays its home games in Estadio Azteca. And of course Mexico City itself—the nerve center of the nation—is an implicit homage to the city-state of Tenochtitlan and to Aztec indomitability.

But to see the Aztec in strictly iconic terms is to misunderstand them. To begin with, the mighty Aztec sustained their empire—the triple alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan—for less than a century before it was eviscerated by European conquerors. For all the fear and loathing the rulers instilled in conquered regions, their dominion was ephemeral. They did not erect temples and disseminate cultural traditions across the countryside as the ancient Romans or Inca did. Instead, the Aztec maintained what some scholars call "a cheap empire," one in which the conquered were permitted to continue governing themselves so long as they ponied up tributary objects—a protection scheme buttressed by periodic shows of force. The Aztec chose to express their ingenuity largely in the epicenter of Tenochtitlan. Yet the great city was in many ways a repository of customs, images, and spiritual practices borrowed from previous civilizations. As López Luján's father, the Mesoamerican scholar Alfredo López Austin, puts it, "The most common misconception is that the Aztec were a completely original culture. They weren't." The Aztecs learned of other cultural traditions through diffusion of ideas from their extensive trade networks.

But the harsh caricature of the Aztec as bloodthirsty is just as misguided. So grossly did the conquering Spaniards overstate the Mexica bloodlust—claiming, for example, that 80,400 humans were put to death at a single temple dedication, a feat that would have depopulated much of central Mexico—that some groups today feel justified in dismissing sacrifice as a European fiction. That's going too far. Chemical examinations during the past 15 years of porous surfaces throughout Mexico City reveal "blood traces everywhere," says López Luján. "You have the sacrificial stones, the sacrificial knives, the bodies of 127 victims—you can't deny the human sacrifice."

But, he is quick to add, you'll find human sacrifice everywhere in the world at that time. The Maya and numerous other cultures predated the Aztec's embrace of the practice. "It isn't the violence of a people but rather of an age—a warlike atmosphere when the religions of the time demanded that humans be sacrificed to replenish the gods," observes López Austin. And that spiritual imperative was received by the Aztec people with considerable anguish, according to analyses of codices by Harvard historian of religions David Carrasco. "They were upset about sacrifice," he says. "I think there are a lot of signs that they were bothered by it."

The codices [Aztec histories] reveal that this was a people with a sophisticated awareness of the limitations of an empire that relied on human sacrifice. Even as they achieved their greatest might...the predicate for their doom was being laid. A people who believed themselves at the center of a highly precarious universe were also inflicted with what Carrasco terms a "cosmic insecurity."

The empire began from scratch. The first Aztec, or Mexica, migrated from the north—from Aztlan, so it was said, though this ancestral homeland has never been located and perhaps existed only in legend. They spoke the Nahuatl tongue of the mighty Toltec, whose dominance across central Mexico had ended in the 12th century. But language was the Mexica's only connection to greatness. Chased off from one Basin of Mexico settlement after another, they at last happened upon an island in Lake Texcoco that no one else wanted and in 1325 proclaimed it Tenochtitlan. Little more than a swamp, Tenochtitlan lacked drinkable water and stones and wood for building. But its scruffy new inhabitants, though "almost totally uncultured," as renowned scholar Miguel León-Portilla puts it, compensated with what he terms "an indomitable will."

These settlers proceeded to dig through the ruins of the once great city-states of Teotihuacan and Tula. What they saw, they appropriated. By 1430 Tenochtitlan had become greater than either city, a marvel of landfill and aqueducts, divided by canals and causeways into four quadrants all in orbit around the centerpiece of a double-staircased pyramid with twin temples at its summit. They built *chinampas*, artificial islands that were used for agriculture by numerous earlier civilizations. None of their flourishes was particularly original, and that was the point. The Mexica sought to establish ancestral connections with empires past—particularly through the machinations of Tlacaelel, the royal consigliere who could boast that "none of the past kings has acted without my opinion or counsel." During the first half of the 15th century, Tlacaelel introduced a new version of Mexica history, asserting that his people were offspring of the great Toltec and elevating Huitzilopochtli—their patron god of the sun and of war—to the pantheon of exalted Toltec deities. The royal counselor went one step further. As Miguel León-Portilla writes, Tlacaelel crafted their imperial destiny as "the conquest of all other nations...to capture victims for sacrifice, because the source of all life, the sun, would die unless it were fed with human blood."

Thus did the reviled newcomers from the north ascend to nobility. They subjugated town after town in the Basin of Mexico. Under Moctezuma I, in the late 1440s, the Mexica and their allies marched over 200 miles to extend their empire southward into the present-day states of Morelos and Guerrero. By the 1450s they had pushed into the northern Gulf coast. And by 1465 the Chalco Confederacy, the lone holdout in the Basin of Mexico, was vanquished.

Every [archeological] finding is a huge boon for Mexico since so many fine artifacts were seized by the conquistadores and brought back to Spain, where they have been dispersed throughout

Europe. Even the Aztec codex, their sacred histories, were altered by the Aztecs as a way to appease the Spanish conquerors. Much of Aztec history was altered to make the Spanish happy, painting the Aztecs as a bloodthirsty and uncivilized people that needed to be conquered. Beyond their aesthetic value, recent new discoveries highlight the Aztec's attention to detail—a preoccupation owing to the high stakes involved. For the Aztec, the appeasement of the gods—and thus the world's survival—depended on an ever growing, ever demanding empire that ultimately could not be sustained. As Carrasco says, "The irony of empire is that you push to the periphery and you push too far, until you become the periphery. You're so far from home that you can't support your warriors with food and transport and you can't protect your merchants. The empire becomes too expensive. And the Aztec couldn't manage it."

Ten years before the Spaniards arrived [Aztec leader] Moctezuma II was apparently plagued by visions and portents. Despite having continued his predecessor's expansionist ways, despite his great power and his gold and turquoise diadem and his 19 children and his zoo crammed with exotic animals and "dwarfs and albinos and hunchbacks"—despite all of this, the ninth Aztec ruler was beset by his own cosmic insecurity. In 1509, according to one codex, "a bad omen appeared in the sky. It was like a flaming ear of corn...it seemed to bleed fire, drop by drop, like a wound in the sky."

Moctezuma's worries were justified. "There were more than 50,000 indigenous warriors revolting, wanting to keep their goods and wanting the Aztec attacks to stop in their community," says Carrasco. Absent this appetite for an uprising, the 500 Spaniards who docked at Veracruz in the spring of 1519, even with their guns and cannon and horses, would have been no match for the Aztec armies.

Instead, Cortés's contingent arrived in Tenochtitlan on the eighth of November escorted by thousands of Tlaxcalan and allied warriors. As awed as the Spaniards were by the spectacle of this gleaming city on a lake—"some of the soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream," one eyewitness recalled—they were not daunted by their host's prowess. Rather, it was Moctezuma who seemed unsure of himself. According to Mesoamerican legend, the great bearded deity Quetzalcoatl—banished after committing incest with his sister—would one day return by water to restore his lordship. This notion was not lost on Moctezuma, who presented Cortés with "the treasure of Quetzalcoatl," a head-to-toe costuming topped off with "a serpent mask inlaid with turquoise."

But was Moctezuma really interpreting the Spaniard as the second coming of the feathered-serpent god, as has long been believed? Or was he cunningly outfitting Cortés in the godly garment of the soon-to-be sacrificed? The gesture was a final Aztec ambiguity. Thereafter, the facts are unassailable. The streets of Tenochtitlan ran red, and in 1521 an empire was buried.

But no matter how deep the archaeologists dig, they will never unearth the core of the Aztec mystique. It will continue to occupy modern Mexico's psyche—there to be felt if not seen, at once primitive and majestic, summoning from ordinary mortals the power to turn swamps into kingdoms.